



MYTH AND PERFORMANCE: A POLYTHEISTIC STUDY OF ONAPPOTTAN.

Jithin John

ABSTRACT

This paper titled "Myth and Performance: A Polytheistic Study of *Onappottan*" is a study on the performative perambulator *Onappottan* who is a regional version of a myth and the psycho social influences of the performance in a group psyche. *Onappottan*, who visits houses in association with the Onam season in Malabar (the northern part of Kerala) is a regional performance which is seen as a version of Mahabali, the king who is the causal character of the season in Kerala mythology. The paper tries to take a psychological mythical study about the performance. The archetypal image of the performance is analyzed and seen how the image in collective consciousness is brought to performance. The paper tries to study the point at where the performance takes the aura and stance of a deity and how it sheds the individuation. The methodology used is the Polytheistic Mythological Studies propounded by the acclaimed post Jungian psychoanalyst, James Hillman. Carl Jung talks about the universal images imprinted in human minds universally across cultures. It analyses how mythical performances transcends the rigidities of religion and regionalism and how it addresses humanity as such. The willing suspension of disbelief and the impersonation of the character happens literally in the context of a performance. *Onappottan* shows how the polytheistic concept of religion addresses the variances of psyches both in individual and group levels. Psychological Myth Studies researches the aetiology of performances, and the paper tries to trace out the latent performance objectives from the point collective polytheistic myth as propounded by James Hillman.

KEYWORDS: Polytheism, *Onappottan*, Myth, Performance.

INTRODUCTION

The development of human functioning, always a question of debates over centuries, has been recognized as situated in particular times and in particular cultures, especially in recent researches. The indispensability of the influence of culture in the cognitive development of human beings has informed the world regarding the significance of invaluable research in the area, along with culturally sensitive programs and their effective implementation. Culture is "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor 1). Culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling, and reacting. It is often acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups. As Walsham explains, culture is a set of shared symbols, norms and values in a social organization. It is also considered as process which unfolds through interwoven sub-processes: material production, symbolic production, and institutional organization, which construct a defined, coded, traditional cultural world, as explained by Johansen, et.al.

Umberto Eco, in his *Looking for a Logic in Culture* describes human culture as a dynamic process as it can select the codes and contexts for perceived hierarchical arrangements, and thereby culture exhibits a semiotic system as language. These codes often get manifested through various cultural performances which can be reflexive, artful and consequential, by being both traditional and emergent at the same time.

Recent researches study in detail about performances, how they are embedded with social significance, cultural meanings and how closely it is associated with the performers' bodies. Schechner, one of the leading theorists of performance studies, identifies that rituals are performative, or they are the acts done while performances are ritualized and that they are codified, repeatable actions. He opines, "Performance must be construed as a "broad spectrum" or "continuum" of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, the performing arts (theatre, dance, music), and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race, and class roles" (Schechner 2). This idea highlights the intercultural, inter-generic and inter-disciplinary nature of performances and the necessity of proper theoretical framework for understanding how performances are regenerated, transmitted, received and evaluated.

Onam is a secular inclusive festival observed in Kerala celebrated by all people of the state irrespective of their caste and religion. Ferdinand de Saussure's seminal work *Course in General Linguistics* revolutionized the entire linguistic philosophy of nineteenth century and the further developments in post structuralism formally inaugurated the critique of text and its varied associations. The critique of text rejected the compartmentalization of rigid structures, which in turn unleashed the play of signifiers. The interpretations in post structuralism further paved way for the inception of Culture Studies in late nineteenth century. Culture Studies encompasses all the meaningful artifacts of culture. The idea of 'cultural texts' presupposes images, practices, behaviours, and symbols that produce and circulate cultural meanings. Stuart Hall observes that "culture is not something to simply appreciate or study, but a critical site of social action and intervention, where power relations are both established and potentially

unsettled" ("Stuart Hall and the Rise of Cultural Studies"). Thus Culture Studies interrogate the underlying meaning of a practise and its varied motives.

Aided with the tenets of Culture Studies, Performance Studies that emerged in the nineteenth century sees performance as a way of understanding behaviour. Erwin Goffman, one of the pioneers of this discipline argues that the new discipline should cover performance in the broadest sense, and should be potentially a tool of cultural intervention. Culture and performance are intricately related and the former enables later to unleash in many circumstances. The theoretical study entitled *Emotions: A Cultural Reader* edited by Helena Wulf argues that emotions are culturally influenced. Culture is a necessary framework for researches to understand variations in emotions. Culture provides structure, guidelines, expectations, and rules to help people to understand and interpret emotions and behaviours. The underlying emotion beneath a performance can be studied in relation to culture.

The performances that take place in association with the festival of Onam can be studied as a cultural text. Here the Mahabali – Vamana myth is fundamental to understand how the respective culture of a locale enables the appropriate emotional expression to establish further. The name Mahabali means 'great sacrifice'. It reflects the unparalleled benevolence and self-sacrifice that the king has made. Claude Levi Strauss observes that, in mythical studies, neither the narrative nor the signifiers holds perennial importance, rather it is the final signified which made to be evaluated. When observed deeply, it is understood that all the cultural performances that linked with Onam revolves around this incomparable sacrifice. The myth is shared cultural memory. The people of Kerala are deeply concerned with this enormous sacrifice that their kind-hearted king has done. There remains an unrevealed guilt that circulates in the community. The people of Kerala rely on numerous performances in order to vent this guilt out. The people are actually honouring the sacrifice of their king. Culture may be best understood as a channel through which emotions are moulded and subsequently expressed. For instance 'Kummattikkali' is a regional art form that can be traced in several locales of Northern Malabar. During the festival of Onam, Kummattikkali performers don a heavily painted colourful wooden mask depicting faces of Krishna, Narada, Kiratha and Dharika from myth. The supreme emotion that rides behind this artform is ecstasy and celebration. The Kummatti theyyam celebrates the myth of Dharikavadham which symbolises the victory of virtue over evil. This particular myth is chosen to throw light on the eternal virtue exhibited by their lord Mahabali. It actually throws light on the relevance of this great sacrifice. With their unique costumes Kummattis are actually entertaining people. As a reward, people offer them small gifts and sweets. It is studied that eastern countries like India demonstrates 'Collectivistic Cultures'. On the other hand, individualistic culture existing in western countries promote individual autonomy, needs, wishes and the possibilities of personal attainments are encouraged. Collectivistic culture are said to promote the desires interdependence of individuals and the notion of social harmony.

Onappottan (also known as *Oneshwaran*) is dumb Theyyam which only listens and seldom speaks. The performance of *Onappottan* is a privileged favour given to the Malaya tribe by king. The Theyyam visits houses on Utharadam and

Thiruvonam days. There is special makeup on face and beard with coconut leaves. Onappottan is never slow paced but the movement is so cadenced that it looks like a hopped movement. Usually he receives money and cereals as dakshina. The paper tries to study the perambulator performance Theyyam named Onappottan which is seen in the interiors of Kannur, Kerala. The performance happens in association with Onam, the festival of Kerala.

Onam is a secular inclusive festival observed in Kerala celebrated by all people of the state irrespective of their caste and religion. Though celebrated as a common festival, Onam has the regional versions of it. Onappottan is such a performance seen in the interiors of Kannur as an informal performer who proclaims the arrival of Onam. There is special makeup on face and beard with coconut leaves. The performer is seen as a representative of Mahabali, the legendary king of the myth. The makeup for the same is also mentionable; the facial colour powders are mixed by coconut palm leaf stems. The wrap is of dark red colour. The ornaments include Munnakk, Kachinkara, Thandakam, Choodakam and bangles.

Collective unconscious is a concept put forth by the much acclaimed Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung. It presents the idea of an intersected psychic space which shares the universal images, figures and archetypes across land, nationalities and cultures. The collective unconscious is not individual specific but is rather acquired through generations. This acquisition is not deliberate and conscious but rather "inherent". The explicit manifestations of such symbols are through many cultural and religious performances. Some silenced repressed unexplored symbols and images take its form in myths and dreams. Analytically studying the archetypes can help in tracing the individuations of people from a cultural point of view.

Archetypes are broad narrative canvases used by the narrators to pass on stories which can address and relate to the audience cross cultural and cross national. An Archetype can be a symbol, image, design or a type which is explicitly or subtly inherent in the texts of cultures universally. This universality of archetypes are because of its radical approach to human experiences and would often make honest representations of human psychic contours which serves as a tool to comprehend the politics and ways of human psychic working. "The Wise Old Woman" is an example.

Carl Jung conceptualized the "objective psyche" acknowledging the multiplicities of psyches. He put the polycentric idea of psyche in comparison with the nature of light.

Jung wrote *lumen naturae* as a multiplicity of partial consciousness like stars or sparks or luminous fishes' eyes. A polytheistic psychology corresponds with this description and provides it with major imagistic formulation in the major traditional language of our civilization, ie. Classical mythology. By providing a divine background of personages and powers for each complex, polytheistic psychology would find place for each spark. It would aim less at gathering them into a unity and more at integrating each fragment according to its own principle, giving each God its due over that portion of consciousness, that symptom, complex, fantasy which calls for an archetypal background. (Hillman 39)

This supposes a creation of a psychic 'divine' space which is polyphonic, gender fluid and inclusive and rather categorizing in different domains, he envisions a multifarious "unity". The single idea of "wholeness" and the stipulated hierarchy agreed among the practitioners of a religious institution is dismissed. As the 'only' centre is displaced, the peripheries too come in the process of defining things. Hence the subsequent inclusivity results in theorizing the unaddressed colours and contours of psyche. Variance is celebrated instead of uniformity. Each cultural experience can broke into the constituent components in turn resembling the source. Polytheistic psychology gives uniqueness to the psyches and places it well in the shared grounds how different it may seem, though.

CONCLUSION

The paper tries to use the polytheism as propounded by the much noted post Jungian theorist, James Hillman.

The myths in which gods enacted their drama are themselves understood as metaphors never as transcendental metaphysics whose categories are divine figures. Hillman emphasizes that all statements concerning myths and gods are to be taken metaphorically, prefixed with an as-if just as all speaking with the archetypal presences of the psyche are translations from one metaphor to the other (J.R. 1)

The aetiology of Onappottan performance is intricate and thoughtful like any cultural performance. Onappottan has an interactive and therapeutic performance phase which works on the principle of talking cure by Sigmund Freud. The strict observation of *vrudha* and the identity of a Malaya caste make the performer and the subject believe that the 'divinely conditioned' personae is synonymous to god. Thus the identity of the performer is suspended and the projected personae takes charge. It is at this juncture both the sides come to a common ground of unveiling of the self and the consolation of the worries take place. At this point Onappottan escalates

from a mere performer to a therapist and this phase of performance witnesses the personification of narrative super humans as put forth in Polytheistic myth by James Hillman. Myths are not disconnected fictitious pieces of narrations, but give a "moral and ethical" sense, cement it with logic, intelligently place it in the cultural contexts and makes the performance so real that it is very much real. As polytheistic myths invalidate uniformity, it becomes easy for the majority to get connected to the god and religion gets humanized.

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